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Introduction to special issue on the Victorian Press Journal

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INTRODUCTION

Annemarie McAllister and Andrew Hobbs

The articles in this volume originate in a conference held at the University of Central Lancashire in December 2008, entitled 'Place in Print: Print in Place: English local and regional newspapers 1800-1925'. It brought together researchers working in this area to share ideas, discover synergies and connections, and indeed interrogate the issue of what we might mean by 'local' and 'national' in the press at this period. Some were still on their Ph.D journey and some were more established academics, but all came to learn and discuss in a most stimulating atmosphere. The idea came from Dr Fred Milton (Newcastle University), who had suggested bringing together postgraduate researchers studying the local and regional press for its own sake, rather than as a historical source, and the conference was organised by Andrew Hobbs (University of Central Lancashire) and Alexander Jackson (Leeds Metropolitan University). The event was supported by the Arts and Humanities Research Council, through their Student-Led Initiatives scheme.

Much of the enthusiasm and interest of the conference is to be found in these articles, which need no external recommendation, but perhaps a little historical background to the study of the press may help the reader to put their arguments into context.

Victorian historians of the press acknowledged the phenomenal growth of provincial newspapers, and contemporary political activists were prepared to pay thousands of pounds to subsidise them in the belief that they could influence voters, but they have been neglected in favour of the metropolitan press.¹ Victorian print culture as a whole was of little interest for the first half of the twentieth century — while there were six significant historical studies of the newspaper press between 1850 and 1887, it took 65 years for the next six to be published. The concept of this as a field worthy of academic study was probably first encouraged by the late Richard D. Altick's 1957 *The English Common Reader: A Social History of the Mass Reading Public, 1800-1900*.² This demonstrated that books were only one part of the nineteenth-century reading diet, with newspapers and other periodicals probably more significant. The contribution of print to wider Victorian culture was recognised in the establishment of the Research Society for

Victorian Periodicals (RSVP) and its associated journal, now known as the *Victorian Periodicals Review*, in 1968. Most of the scholarship connected with RSVP has concerned elite metropolitan literary periodicals rather than newspapers, with provincial newspapers particularly neglected; but the methods and sources pioneered by these researchers have wider application, and their study of these apparently evanescent examples of printed culture now reaches a wider audience.³

The title of the Research Society for Victorian Periodicals and its journal both subsume newspapers under the broader category of periodicals, meaning any publication issued from a press periodically. However, 'periodical' also has a narrower meaning, similar to the present-day magazine, which excludes newspapers. Similarly, 'book history' is used to describe the dynamic historical approach that combines the study of production, circulation and reception of reading materials; but is misleading when applied to the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, when periodicals far outnumbered books (for the nineteenth century, John North estimates there were more than 100 times as many individual editions of periodicals and newspapers published than books).⁴ 'Newspaper and periodical history' and 'the history of print culture' are offered here as clearer formulations. A further note on terminology: the topic of this special issue is the local and regional press rather than the provincial press, in order to include the London local press.

Some studies in the 1960s and '70s had explored working-class reading which often included periodical literature, but two surveys of the Victorian newspaper press, Alan Lee's 1976 *The origins of the popular press in England: 1855-1914* (1976) and Lucy Brown's *Victorian News and Newspapers* (1985), and the 1982 edited collection *The Victorian Periodical Press: Samplings and Soundings*, stand out for their combination of breadth and detail, and their integration of metropolitan and provincial developments.⁵ Another seminal volume in this area was *Investigating Victorian Journalism* (1990), which brought together leading writers in the field to produce detailed studies, as the title suggests, and it is instructive to examine some of the comments made there, nearly 20 years ago, in which writers commented on the current or imagined future state of research in this area.⁶ Margaret Beetham's remark that periodicals, although 'not a window on to the past or even a mirror of it', are often treated as 'a quarry or mine from which [students and academics] can dig isolated articles' is, we hope, no longer true. The essays in the present collection show themselves

only too aware of the complexity of meaning-making and the difficulties of definition when working on periodicals as texts – or even deciding in what form such texts consist. Similarly, Brian Maidment lamented the state of research on periodicals, asserting that ‘a case has still to be made for the centrality of the study of periodicals as a scholarly project’. The many publications and conferences in the last 20 years, as well as the present collection, suggest that the case has been convincingly made.⁷ The argument seems to have been won for the press as a subject of enquiry in itself, rather than as a ‘quarry’ or value-free source of information and illustration.

In another chapter of *Investigating Victorian Journalism*, Joel Wiener advances the case for a Dictionary of Victorian Journalism; too much, he feels, for one scholar, but as a collaborative venture, ‘one well worth doing’, and this suggestion in fact reached fruition only in 2008 with the publication of the monumental *Dictionary of Nineteenth Century Journalism (DNCJ)*.⁸ Margaret Beetham’s 1990 chapter, ‘Towards a Theory of the Periodical as a Publishing Genre’, discusses the heterogeneity of periodicals and their multiple purposes and patterns of consumption to expose paradoxes and pose questions in a way which has led to much later work, and indeed underpins many of the articles in this collection. She suggests that periodicals operate as both open and closed systems, that they have both a material aspect and a signifying aspect, and that what we have of them, in many cases, is only a partial survival or one which is altered radically by the very circumstances of its preservation:

*A periodical, by definition, appears in single numbers separated by time. Putting several numbers into one bound volume changes all this, not least by suggesting that really the periodical is a kind of book and the numbers are incomplete sections of the whole. Putting covers round the pages has ensured that they survive, but the survival is bought at the price of the form of the text. Equally important is what does not appear within those stiff covers. Binders tended to think that end-papers and advertisements were not part of the periodical and so left them out of the bound versions.*⁹

These ontological questions about what we are studying when we approach periodicals as texts still give us pause.

Dominant theories of English press history — such as Habermas's 'decline of the public sphere' (recently restated by Hampton), the radical view that the press became an agent of control (Curran) or the more Whiggish account of growing freedom of the press and its role as 'Fourth Estate' (Barker) — all focus on metropolitan publications.¹⁰ However the growth of urban history from the 1960s onwards provided some balance, treating the local press as a significant part of the cultural and political life of towns and cities.¹¹ We would suggest two reasons for the neglect of the majority press of the Victorian and Edwardian eras, local and regional newspapers: first, the unmanageable volume of material, requiring an enormous amount of research before meaningful generalisations can be made; and second, unexamined notions of 'influence', which have guided researchers towards publications produced at the centre of cultural power, London. The assumption has been that texts worth studying are 'influential' texts, i.e. those that changed the attitudes or behaviour of influential people, such as Cabinet Ministers or a small elite of metropolitan literary writers and editors. The study of print culture has much to gain from broader historical currents, which have shown that political and cultural power was widely distributed in the long nineteenth century, across classes and across the country.¹²

Brown showed how a sense of place inhered in many of the smaller, more genuinely local papers, and links this to the preponderance of single-industry towns with restricted news interests in common, until the First World War drew the nation together and decisively established the national newspaper. Indeed, Welsh identity existed only in print in the nineteenth century, an instance of how print can intensify and elaborate space, and shape a territory.¹³ Brown foreshadows several of the articles in this special issue, in her interest in the overlapping distribution areas of 'local' publications, their uses and extended circulations (i.e. how many readers consumed a single copy and in what circumstances), and their engagement with readers, but in such a wide study she only has space to indicate these as areas of interest.

Despite its relative neglect in the history of print culture, the local press has been an object of study for local historians since the 1950s, and their articles, pamphlets and books provide a useful foundation of facts, alongside hagiographic company histories.¹⁴ Academic books, articles and dissertations have built on this literature, the best of them also providing context and theoretical frameworks.¹⁵ A new level of academic interest in

the local press is suggested by two 2006 journal issues devoted entirely to the subject, *Journalism Studies* and the *Manchester Region History Review*.¹⁶ The former, edited by Andrew Walker, combines studies of individual titles and more thematic pieces, to make a strong case for the depth and diversity of the field. The latter, edited by Brian Maidment, is a collection of case studies of individual publications, its breadth aided by the exceptional richness of Manchester's nineteenth-century print culture, although it focuses on periodicals rather than newspapers. Also worthy of mention is the substantial body of work on the print trade, in the provinces as well as the metropolis, collected in the yearly Print Networks volumes, associated with the annual British Book Trade History conferences.¹⁷

Aled Jones, another contributor to *Investigating Victorian Journalism* in 1990, gave the keynote lecture at the conference on which this journal is based, in recognition of his vast corpus of work in this area, which treats the press of England and Wales in a multi-dimensional way, seeing the newspaper simultaneously as a cultural, economic, political and material object. In 1990 he was commenting on the terms 'provincial press' and 'national press' being 'anachronistic and highly problematic constructions', a point which is developed in some of the articles in this volume (see those by Hobbs and Jackson).¹⁸ Besides the work of Jones, that of two other scholars is pertinent to the study of print in place, because of the ways in which they connect print culture to wider historiography. Patrick Joyce integrates the Victorian local press into a study of liberal urban governance and also stresses how the physical juxtaposition of unrelated news items on the same page, or under the same section heading, could create a new reality:

*The local press was extraordinarily important in reconstituting the town and the city as a community ... presenting the town as a universe of voluntary and religious associations in all the range of their many local activities. These it reported on as elements in the life of a single entity.*¹⁹

This analysis of the community-building project of many local papers raises the question, what did the readers make of it? And what kind of evidence could reveal readers' responses? David Paul Nord has begun to answer these questions for newspapers in the United States by his skilful interpretation of unpublished letters to the editor, letters published at times of civic crisis, and nineteenth-century government household expenditure surveys. He

distinguishes two contrasting functions of the local newspaper: to report what happens in a place (facts), and to encourage the creation of community (forum).²⁰ Nord's approach depends on historical evidence which rarely survives, but what little there is in the British Isles could be exploited to great effect using his methods.

Professor Jones's keynote lecture explored the issue of digitisation, which is now a central feature of any discussion of print-based resources. This is a particularly significant time to be examining local and regional newspapers with the recent launch of the *19th Century British Library Newspapers collection*. Other digital resources include *19th Century UK Periodicals*, *British Periodicals* and the *nineteenth century serials edition (ncse)*, while the ever-expanding *Waterloo Directory of Victorian Periodicals, 1800–1900* and the recent *DNCJ* enable researchers to contextualise these electronic editions much more easily.²¹ There was much discussion of this, but a welcome feature of the conference was the reminder of the material presence of the artefacts being discussed, with a wide selection of original copies of papers made available for perusal. Jones emphasised this in his defence of the experience of the object, and the 'total picture' which is obtained by the reading of page after page, even the turning of the page, which is not ever possible to reproduce, however successful digitisation may be. The hierarchy of information and the richness of context need careful consideration during digitisation and must always be borne in mind.

At this opportune time for the study of local and regional print culture, what are the most pressing research directions? Six avenues stand out: readers' responses to these distinctive texts; individual studies of types of publication, such as sports titles, the religious press, magazines, evening papers and weekend miscellanies; an examination of types of content, such as autobiography, reviews, history, illustration and advertising; more theoretical work, building on the insights of Patrick Joyce and Benedict Anderson in relation to the role of print culture in creating 'imagined communities' below the level of the nation; more research on the relationship between metropolitan and provincial print cultures, and finally an extension of scholarship on the Victorian age into the Edwardian and inter-war periods.²²

Against such a background, these articles can be seen and valued as moving the debate forward significantly.²³ Andrew Hobbs, in the wake of

Lucy Brown's 1985 remarks on the apparent lack of a national press in the nineteenth century, develops a convincing argument that local and regional publications did in many ways act as a national press system. Not only was news carried of 'national' events (such as Parliamentary debates) and international topics, but there was widespread use of syndicated material, from fiction and pre-printed 'middles' to advertisements. Personnel, practices and technical innovations were shared and moved around the country, and the papers had a wider range than might have been thought from their titles. The very word 'national', when used, often had a different, wider signification from the one we would attach today, as Hobbs demonstrates. The wider scope and argumentation of Hobbs's work is complemented by Mary Lester's detailed case study of local London newspapers and their intersection with concepts of identity and place. The unusually local focus of these papers illustrates London's exceptionalism, and suggests a unique market relationship between London's 'metropolitan' dailies and its 'parochial' weeklies, not found in other parts of the country at that time. As she explains, this area has been recognised as under-researched, and she illustrates how London, sometimes seen as a metropolitan monolith, operated as a collection of local areas which in themselves formed sizeable conurbations. This richly documented article shows how study of the local press can move into the territory of cultural geography to examine residents' sense of place and attachment, as well as the perennial question of the degree to which local publications reflect or shape local opinion and identity.

Moving up the country, Alexander Jackson takes Sheffield as a location to explore another under-researched form of publication, the Football and Sports Special. These titles, separate publications from the parent paper, enjoyed a wide circulation and are particularly interesting for the media historian as they may well have reached readers who would not have consumed other publications. Supporting Hobbs's argument, Jackson illustrates a strongly 'national' news element in content and approach and documents a widespread regional circulation in an apparent 'local' publishing venture. However, his work also echoes Lester's interest in the readership's identification with papers as part of the construction of their identities, whether to do with a sport or a location. In a comprehensive survey of the Sheffield-based special, Jackson demonstrates how the paper appealed both to local and to wider interests, and how various sub-groups of sporting fans were included in the paper's audience.

Fred Milton also investigates a more specialist area, the widespread development of interactive children's columns in his study of the 'Dicky Bird Society', founded by the *Newcastle Weekly Chronicle*, and its many imitators. He makes a strong case for the significance for the local press of such children's societies, and sets this against national developments. Once again, the local, rooted in a specific community, is seen to intersect with regional and national movements; the focus on kindness to animals, conservation and, in particular, bird protection in the many local societies eventually gave rise to national conservation and protection movements. However, Milton shows the complexity of press studies by showing that it is possible to interpret the 'new' interactive relationship with readers as a strategy to expand and retain readership, as much as to educate children, give them a voice, and encourage good works.

Alison Toplis also examines interrelationships between the press, its readers, and a further element in the local community, businesses, in her exploration of the advertising columns of Hereford and Worcester papers in the early nineteenth century. Toplis shows that the study of press advertising, as well as providing valuable data on the retailing of goods, can also illuminate the intended readership, in terms of their expected interests, what they could afford, and their buying habits. Showing awareness of the evolving use of newspaper advertising, and its aspirational aspects, she develops a convincing analysis of how readers, including those from the working classes, were addressed in the advertising of ready-made clothing. Although the focus here is more purely local, Toplis's exploration of the mutually beneficial relationship between press and businesses is a starting point for further studies of other trades and locations. In fact, all articles in this special edition unite in opening up avenues for further study, problematising concepts of the 'local', 'regional' and 'national' press, and, of course, underlining the centrality of newspapers as a cultural resource for those who read them and advertised in them.

It is encouraging to see the further exploration of this cultural phenomenon as an integral part of the study of local and regional history, in the present collection. The articles make a strong case for the importance of studying these types of publication, whether we nominate them as local, regional, provincial, or indeed any other term. The articles take us several steps further along the path of raising the profile of such publications, and we hope to see future conferences on the local and regional press, and of course more publications like the present volume.

An email network for those interested in the history of such newspapers has now been established, in response to interest shown at the conference:

<http://uk.groups.yahoo.com/group/Local_and_provincial_press_history/>

NOTES

1. A. Andrews, *The History of British Journalism: From the Foundation of the Newspaper Press in England to the Repeal of the Stamp Act in 1855, With Sketches of Press Celebrities* (Routledge/Thoemmes Press. London 1859/1998); J. Grant, *The Newspaper Press: Its Origin - Progress - and Present Position* (Tinsley Brothers. London 1871); H. Fox Bourne, *English Newspapers: Chapters in the History of Journalism* (Routledge/Thoemmes Press. London 1887/1998).
2. Richard D. Altick, *The English Common Reader: A Social History of the Mass Reading Public, 1800-1900* (University of Chicago Press. Chicago 1957).
3. *Waterloo Directory of English Newspapers and Periodicals, 1800-1900*. 1st series. 10 vol. (North Waterloo Academic Press, Waterloo, Ontario, 1997).
4. 'Compared to books', *Waterloo Directory of English Newspapers and Periodicals* online: <www.victorianperiodicals.com/series2/TourOverview.asp> [accessed 19 November 2006].
5. L. James, *Fiction for the Working Man, 1830-1850: A Study of the Literature Produced for the Working Classes in Early Victorian Urban England* (Oxford University Press. Oxford 1963) and P. Hollis, *The Pauper Press: A Study in Working Class Radicalism of the 1830s* (Oxford University Press. Oxford 1970); A.J. Lee, *The Origins of the Popular Press in England 1855-1914* (Croom Helm. London 1976); L. Brown, *Victorian News and Newspapers* (Clarendon Press. Oxford 1985); J. Shattock and M. Wolff (eds.), *The Victorian Periodical Press: Samplings and Soundings* (Leicester University Press. Leicester, 1982).
6. L. Brake, A. Jones and L. Madden (eds.), *Investigating Victorian Journalism* (Palgrave Macmillan. London 1990).
7. M. Beetham, 'Towards a Theory of the Periodical as a Publishing Genre', pp.19-32; p.20, and B.E. Maidment, 'Victorian Periodicals and Academic Discourse', pp.143-54; p.153, both in Brake et al. op cit.. A good selection of recent work on periodicals is reviewed in K. Boardman, '"Charting the Golden Stream": Recent Work on Victorian Periodicals', *Victorian Studies*. Vol. 48. Number 3. Spring 2006. pp. 505-517.
8. J. H. Wiener, 'Sources for the Study of Newspapers', in Brake et al. op cit, pp.155-65; p.163. L. Brake and M. Demoor (eds.), *Dictionary of Nineteenth-Century Journalism in Great Britain and Ireland* (Academia Press and the British Library. Ghent and London 2008).
9. Beetham, op cit. p.23.
10. J. Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: an Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (Polity. Oxford 1992); J. Curran, 'Media and the Making of British Society, c.1700-2000,' *Media History*, Vol.8. Number 2. 2002, pp.135-154; M. Hampton, *Visions of the Press in Britain, 1850-1950* (University of Illinois Press. Urbana 2004); H. Barker, *Newspapers, Politics and English Society, 1695-1855* (Longman. Harlow 2000).

11. For example, D. Read, *Press and People, 1790-1850: Opinion in Three English Cities* (Edward Arnold. London 1961); D. Read, *The English Provinces, 1760-1960: a Study in Influence* (Edward Arnold. London 1964) D. Fraser, *Power and Authority in the Victorian City* (Blackwell. Oxford 1979); D. Fraser, 'The Nottingham Press 1800-1850', *Transactions of the Thoroton Society*. 1963, pp.46-66; D.Fraser, 'The Press in Leicester c. 1790-1850', *Transactions of the Leicestershire Archaeological and Historical Society*. Vol.42. 1967. pp.53-75. An exception is a study of the cultural role of satirical periodicals, S. Gunn, *The Public Culture of the Victorian Middle Class: Ritual and Authority in the English Industrial City, 1840-1914* (Manchester University Press. Manchester 2000).
12. D. Eastwood, *Government and Community in the English Provinces, 1700-1870* (Macmillan. Basingstoke 1997); P. Joyce, *The Rule of Freedom: Liberalism and the Modern City* (Verso. London 2003); D. Russell, *Looking North: Northern England and the National Imagination* (Manchester University Press. Manchester 2004); P. Bailey, *Leisure and Class in Victorian England: Rational Recreation and the Contest for Control, 1830-1885* (Methuen. London 1987).
13. A.G. Jones, 'Reading 19th-century journalism: Some issues of historiography and research method,' keynote lecture, *Place in Print: Print in Place: English local and regional newspapers 1800-1925* conference, University of Central Lancashire, Preston, December 2008.
14. Lancashire examples include M. Haines, *The Newspapers of Burnley* (Burnley and District Historical Society. Burnley 1991); M. Roberts, *Read All About It! — From the Local Press of Yester-Year* (Typescript, box 3, folder 2, Roberts Collection, University of Central Lancashire, n.d.); 'Rochdale 150: 150 years of the Observer'. <http://www.rochdaleobserver.co.uk/community/rochdale_150/s/508735_150_years_of_the_observer> [accessed 1/3/2009]. Few, however, can match the Victorian pioneer, F. Leary, *History of the Manchester Periodical Press* (unpublished manuscript, Manchester Central Reference Library, MSf052 L161, 1897).
15. For example, G.A. Cranfield, *The Development of the Provincial Newspaper, 1700-1760* (Clarendon Press. Oxford 1962); P.J. Lucas, *The First Furness Newspapers: the History of the Furness Press From 1846 to c.1880* (unpublished M.Litt. dissertation. University of Lancaster 1971); M. Milne, *The Newspapers of Northumberland and Durham: a Study of Their Progress During the 'Golden Age' of the Provincial Press* (Graham. Newcastle upon Tyne 1971); A.J. Lee, 'The Management of a Victorian Local Newspaper: The Manchester City News, 1864-1900,' *Business History*. Vol.15 1973. pp.131-148.
16. *Journalism Studies* Vol.7. Number 3. 2006 and the *Manchester Region History Review* Vol.17. Number 2. 2006.
17. The tenth volume of the Print Networks series is due this year; recent relevant volumes include J. Hinks & C. Armstrong, (eds.), *Book Trade Connections From the Seventeenth to the Twentieth Centuries* (Oak Knoll Press and British Library. London and New Castle, DE 2008); J. Hinks & C. Armstrong (eds.), *Printing Places: Locations of Book Production & Distribution Since 1500* (Oak Knoll Press and British Library. London and New Castle, DE 2005); P. Isaac & B. McKay (eds.), *The Reach of Print: Making, Selling, and Using Books* (St. Paul's Bibliographies. Winchester 1998); P. Isaac & B. McKay (eds.), *The Moving Market: Continuity and Change in the Book Trade* (Oak Knoll Press. New Castle, DE 2001).

18. A.G. Jones, 'Local Journalism in Victorian Political Culture' in Brake et al. op cit. pp.63-70; p. 63. Jones has also since published the invaluable *Powers of the Press: Newspapers, Power and the Public in Nineteenth-Century England* (Ashgate. London 1996) and *Press, Politics and Society: a History of Journalism in Wales* (University of Wales Press. Cardiff. 1993).
19. Joyce. op cit. p.125.
20. D.P. Nord, *Communities of Journalism: a History of American Newspapers and Their Readers* (University of Illinois Press. Urbana 2001).
21. *Waterloo Directory of Victorian Periodicals, 1800-1900* www.victorianperiodicals.com/series2/ [accessed 5/3/2009].
22. The literature on local and regional newspapers for the first half of the twentieth century is small; notable examples include Lee. op cit; D. Boyce, J. Curran and P. Wingate (eds.), *Newspaper History From the Seventeenth Century to the Present Day* (Constable. London 1978); C. Buckley, 'The Baron and the Brewer: Political Subsidy and the Last Years of the *Manchester Courier*', *Manchester Region History Review*. Vol.1 Number 1. 1987. pp. 44-49; C. Buckley, 'The Search for "a Really Smart Sheet": The Conservative Evening Newspaper Project in Edwardian Manchester', *Manchester Region History Review*. Vol.8 1994. pp.21-28; M. Dawson, 'Party Politics and the Provincial Press in Early Twentieth Century England: The Case of the South West', *Twentieth Century British History*. Vol. 9. Number 2. 1998. pp.201-218; S. Pedersen, 'What's in a Name? The Revealing Use of Noms De Plume in Women's Correspondence to Daily Newspapers in Edwardian Scotland' *Media History*. Vol.10. Number 3. 2004. pp.175-185.
23. Ria Snowden's conference paper (not included here) focused on a proprietor and how her exercise of professional power shaped the *Newcastle Chronicle*, as well as much of the north-east's print trade. Sarah Hodgson is revealed as a struggling businesswoman whose story illustrates both the importance of Newcastle as a print centre and the contribution of women to this trade in the nineteenth century. For a version of the paper, see R. Snowden, 'Sarah Hodgson and the Business of Print, 1800-1822', in J. Hinks, C. Armstrong, and M. Day (eds.), *Periodicals and Publishers: the Newspaper and Journal Trade 1740-1914* (British Library and Oak Knoll Press. London and New Castle, DE 2009).